

## *Extract From Chapter Eight: Music While You Work*



With the advantage of hindsight, cultural historians like to suggest that there was an overnight seismic shift in the musical landscape of 1950s Britain. The truth is that the changes that occurred were a gradual process that accelerated through that decade.

1955 was a watershed, however, because that was the year when a chubby American musician with a slick of damp hair arrived on these shores. Bill Haley played country guitar and led a six-piece band, which he called the Comets. His side-men included a honking tenor sax player, a thumping two-beat drummer and a bass player who lay down on the stage and played his instrument ‘like a ship-wrecked sailor adrift on a floating spar’, according to Tiny Winters, who wasn’t impressed. The music they played was crude; the melody was nursery-rhyme simple, and their three-chord harmonies were a throwback to the ukelele strummers of the 1920s. They called it rock ’n roll.

‘Nine, ten, eleven o’clock, twelve o’clock rock!  
We’re going to rock around the clock tonight!’

British musicians were appalled. There was nothing to like about this music: it couldn’t be sensibly adapted to their fourteen-piece dinner-jacketed ensembles. But there was an audience who liked the fact that you could hear the beat (you couldn’t escape it) and it was fun to dance to. There was only one tempo and only one dance, a kind of jiving jitter-bug that anybody could do without taking ballroom dancing lessons. The new music found its new public in the evacuees

and blitz babies, who were growing up in a wonderful new world of welfare and full employment.

In June 1956, the Lew Stone Band was booked to play at the Ritz Ballroom in Manchester, one of Mecca Dancing's principal ballrooms. A reporter from the *Manchester Evening News* interviewed him during the session, and found the 58-year-old band leader in reflective mood:

‘Lew Stone stands, a small, wise, grey-haired figure, centre stage of the Ritz; and as he conducts, he smiles benignly on the dead-pan youngsters below him. It isn't so very far away in time, that period in the 30s when Lew led the band that was Britain's hottest, but it is a world away in spirit. “You're young, perhaps you wouldn't understand”, he told me. “But the atmosphere was so different then. People enjoyed themselves and we enjoyed playing for them so much that it was a hobby as well as a job.”

Since the war, Lew has preferred freelancing as a musical director to leading a big band of his own: “It's down to economics: the really good musicians earn so much more doing session work and recordings, to want to go on the road.” ’

In 1957 and 1958 Lew continued to lead big bands for Mecca at the Leeds and Glasgow Locarnos. His girl singer at Leeds was Sheila Southern, at the start of what would be a long and successful career as a solo vocalist.

The palais de danse nationwide were still catering for the ageing generation of committed ballroom dancers, although they now had to fight for their place on the sprung maple floors, alongside the jivers and twisters. In some halls, the dance bands would generously give the stage over to a pop group during the interval. But most managements still acknowledged that many dancers wanted to dance the quickstep, foxtrot, tango, rhumba or waltz. In Green's Playhouse, Joyce Stone recalls, the rule was ‘No Jiving’ during a ballroom number. If any couple was seen to breach this embargo ‘they'd shine a spotlight on you and you had to leave the floor’. You didn't argue with the Green's bouncers.



The Lyceum Theatre on the Strand had been closed during the War, but subsequently was taken over by the Mecca Group, and converted into a huge dance hall.

In 1958, Mecca's dance promoters launched a scheme to win back their loyal ballroom patrons, by promoting some name bands from the Dance Band Days. Lew Stone and his Band was booked for a nostalgic two week stint at the Lyceum (taking over from resident Denny Boyce) with the full complement of five saxes, four brass and four rhythm players. Fifty years on, pianist Gordon Langford recalls that the Lyceum gig wasn't a happy experience:

‘Lew had worked out a programme of all his best arrangements from the 1930s – he called it ‘Monseigneur Memories’. All good stuff – but it soon became apparent that that the kids didn't want

that sort of thing. They were very unkind, shouted out “go back to the museum”. They didn’t want to hear ‘Oh Monah’ or ‘Georgia’ – they wanted to the songs that were Top of the Pops.’

Leslie Stone was quickly despatched to Denmark Street, to buy up some published arrangements of ‘Sadie’s Shawl’, ‘Puttin’ on the Style’, and ‘A Handful of Songs’. Lew’s pocket diary for those weeks in the summer of 1958 tell the story of an adaptable maestro cutting his cloth to suit the changing musical fashions:

Aug 7  
meet ERNIE at Lyceum

Aug 12  
2.30 band rehearsal  
7.30-11.30 usual programme

Aug 14  
7.30-11.30 (3 hrs of music) Jive only plus Rock & Roll

Aug 15  
7.30-11.30 usual programme but with added lively music

Aug 16  
3.00-5.45 ballroom programme  
7-11.30 usual programme but with added bright

no tangos?  
no waltzes?

Aug 17  
3.00-6.00 ballroom  
7.30-11.30 3 hrs Jive only

Lew Stone recognised what was happening to British popular music in the 1950s, even if he didn’t altogether approve of the new sounds:

‘These days most of the kids seem to have been born with a sense of rhythm. I believe this is down to changes that have taken place from the lively songs of the 30s, lyrics with a story, smooth and at times sentimental music, ragtime and jazz – for listening to as well as dancing to – to the present day with its pop groups and their tremendous but mostly crude beat, with repetitive rhythms and

repetitive words to fit. This form of change in the popular music of the West I put down to the tensions of mind of the people during the period leading up to the War, during the War and then the many years of recovery.'

In 1959, the Lew Stone Band was booked to broadcast on the BBC 'Music While You Work' series. Although now firmly established in the schedules, having been on the air continuously since 1940, this was the first time Lew had been invited to take part. Kenneth Baynes, Assistant Head of Light Music Programmes (Sound) wrote to Miss W. Heritage in BBC Contracts Department:

'With the agreement of Light Music Manager, I am placing Lew Stone and his band in MWYW for the first time in Week 3 (16/1/59). The agreed line-up is 5 brass, 4 saxes, 4 rhythm plus Lew Stone. May I please have a costing for this?'

The running order for that programme shows a musical director falling in line with the current BBC policy of 80% newly published hit songs. Only a couple of Good Old Tunes were included: 'Sunny Side of the Street' and 'Serenade for a Wealthy Widow'. All the other numbers were the best-sellers of the day, top of their publisher's plug list: Bobby Darin's 'Dream Lover', Russ Conway's 'Side Saddle', Alyn Ainsworth's 'Bedtime for Drums', the title song from the music 'Gigi', Sidney Bechet's 'Petite Fleur' and Lionel Bart's 'Living Doll'. No vocals were permitted, although it was traditional for ballroom bands to bring their vocalists along to these sessions, to sing wordlessly beside the band. They got a fee for that.

Assistant Head of Light Music Programmes didn't hear the first live broadcast, but arranged for a playback two weeks later. He wrote to Lew:

'We have just heard a playback for your Music While You Work programme and I am glad to tell you that it was satisfactory, and, in due course, you will be hearing about further engagements.'

Three further dates were scheduled: in April, July and August. After the July programme, Anne Norman wrote to Lew Stone from Devon. Her letter provided more encouraging feedback than A.H.L.M.P. (S) had felt able to volunteer:

'Dear Mr Stone,  
I have just switched on Music while You Work, and the band is playing 'Isle of Capri'. I cannot find the Radio Times or a blasted newspaper to find who is playing today, but I am sure it is your band. I haven't heard it for a long time but that lovely crisp clear

rhythmic beat and the double bass drum beat at the end of each piece – I would know it anywhere!

Please don't mind me writing to you. I only wanted to thank you all for lots of wonderful times we had dancing to your band.'

The following week, Lew had an unwelcome call from Jim Davidson, Light Music Manager, who relayed the bad news was that BBC budget cut-backs would mean that the slots available for bands of fourteen players were going to be reduced drastically. However, if Lew could come up with a formula for MWYW that required fewer instrumentalists, that would be considered. A letter from Donald MacLean (M.O.L.E. (S)) confirmed that.

'Dear Lew

I write to confirm that we will be glad to consider a group of a different size if you should decide to change from your present fourteen piece instrumentation, for which broadcasting prospects are, as you know, meagre.'

No sooner said, than done. The resourceful leader/arranger quickly came up with a new small-scale light music ensemble: piano, guitar, bass and drums, with muted trumpet and clavioline (a lightweight electronic keyboard which he would play himself). He proposed that the group be called 'Lew Stone and His Restful Rhythm'. M.O.L.E. (S) wrote to A.H.L.M.P.(S) and A.H.L.E.(S):

'I have discussed with Lew Stone the composition of a more 'economic' group. He would like now to form a 6-piece group for morning MWYW. I wonder therefore if you would like to transfer him from your 'afternoon' list to your 'morning' list. He asked particularly if he might have a pair of 30-minute programmes as a trial rather than one, and I promised to pass on this request to you. He feels that his suggested title – 'Lew Stone and His Restful Rhythm' is not inappropriate to MWYW, but I warned him that you might feel otherwise!'

A.H.L.M.P (S) banned the title – 'it won't do at all', but booked the Lew Stone Sextet for a first trial on October 15<sup>th</sup> 1959. Gordon Langford played piano on that session. He was always happy to take direction from his veteran leader:

'If he wanted something played in a particular way, he'd shove me off the piano stool, and show me how to do it. There's a tricky piano part in 'Serenade to a Wealthy Widow', which he wanted played precisely as he'd written it. He knew exactly the sound he wanted to hear, whether it was big band, pit orchestra

or sextet: clean, refined, so musical.’

‘Lew was a musician first and foremost. He wanted a style of playing that was precise without losing any of its musicality.’ And his reputation was such that he could say “this is how it will be” and usually he’d have his way. Some band leaders would have a contretemps with the producer over their programme and what was to be in it, but not Lew. He was the man.’

The survivor made his mark on MWYW, and secured a slot for his ensemble for every year from 1959 to 1967. After the first broadcast, he swapped the muted trumpet for a clarinet doubling flute, which gave a nice little earner to Al Baum, and later Manny Winters. Dick Abell (born 1928) and Terry Walsh were the regular guitarists, with Benny Wright on bass and George Fierstone on drums.

The MWYW running orders stored in the BBC archives show a musical director adapting to the new trends, while continuing to play his dues to the great songwriters of the 1930s. A Jerome Kern medley would be followed by ‘Sparrers Can’t Sing’ and ‘Never on a Sunday’ Ken Dodd’s sentimental ‘Love is Like a Violin’ would segue to Al Bowlly’s ballad ‘The Very Thought of You’ Hit songs from ‘Mary Poppins’ and ‘The Sound of Music’ would alternate with Cole Porter medleys. Towards the end of the eight-year sequence, songs by Lennon & McCartney would begin to elbow their way into the programme